

The Risen Lord Appears

Sunday school lesson for the week of April 8, 2018

By Dr. Hal Brady

Spring Quarter: Acknowledging God

Unit 2: All Glory and Honor

Lesson Scripture: John 21:1-14

Lesson Aims

1. Recount the story of Jesus' appearance at the Sea of Galilee following his resurrection.
2. Identify elements of the story that reveal Jesus' constant provision for his followers.

21:1-14 reminds us that for God no matter is too big or too small. In this story, Jesus surprises his disciples with a morning meal. This is a simple gesture that underlines Jesus' promise to always provide what they need.

As the text opens, John has already recorded events from the day of resurrection itself (John 20). Mary Magdalene, finding Jesus' tomb empty, told Simon Peter and "the other disciple" (apparently John himself) that Jesus' body had been taken. The two walked to the tomb to see for themselves. Next, Jesus appeared to Mary and confirmed that he was indeed alive.

Later that same day, the "first day of the week," Jesus appeared to his disciples in a locked room. Then he appeared to them again a week later, that time addressing Thomas, who had been missing before. Evidently, Thomas had needed and received personal, tangible evidence that Jesus really was alive.

Scholars tell us that the appearance to Thomas is, in certain ways, the climax of John's Gospel in light of Jesus' statement, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). However, John then immediately informs us of the "many other signs" (miracles) that Jesus performed (20:30). As scholars assert, these comprise the fabric of this Gospel. And by understanding the meaning of these signs, we can put our faith in the risen Jesus whom we have not seen (20:31).

Unhappy Result (John 21:1-4)

"Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias..." (21:1). With this 21st chapter, we come to the final recorded appearance of Jesus in John's Gospel. The word "afterward" refers to the unspecified amount of time between the previous appearances in and near Jerusalem and this one that takes place by the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is also known as the Sea of Tiberias and the Lake of Gennesaret. It is a large freshwater lake of about 64 square miles, and it is the dominant feature of the region where Jesus grew up and conducted so much of his ministry. For

instance, it was along the shore of this lake that Jesus called his first disciples (Matthew 4:18-22). And those disciples were eyewitnesses of the miracles Jesus performed in the area around the lake.

Now, with Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread complete (John 19:14), some of the disciples have arrived back in this familiar territory (Mark 14:28;16:7). The walking distance from Jerusalem is approximately 70 to 75 miles.

We are told that seven men other than Jesus are present on this occasion (John 21:2). It is important to note that the shepherd had been smitten and the sheep had been scattered. Yet here we find seven of the disciples in Galilee, still held together in a unique bond. What can account for this? Alexander Maclaren, non-conformist English minister, writes, "There is only one explanation ... Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. That drew them together once more..."

Peter states in verse 3 that he is going fishing, and the other disciples go with him. Some have interpreted Peter's announcement to an expression of impatience or despair, a sign that he is returning to his old way of life from which Jesus had called him. But, according to scholars, the text does not support this as the sole or even the best interpretation. Peter may simply be hungry, or he may want to retain a means of self-support, not knowing what the Lord intends for him personally. And as we previously mentioned, the other disciples decided to join him.

Fishing, as we are informed, is generally done at night, when fish are nearer the water's surface and so that fish can be sold fresh the next morning. But Peter and these disciples have an unsuccessful night on the sea, and they are frustrated.

At sunrise, however, they are finishing up, when an unknown voice from the shore instructs them to try the opposite side of the boat. Some people find it hard to believe that the disciples didn't recognize Jesus. But dim light and the distance probably are the culprits. Further, the disciples may not be expecting to see the risen Jesus in this particular setting. On the Emmaus Road, another account of the resurrection appearances, Jesus seems deliberately to prevent his identity from being known. And that may also be the case here.

Unforeseen Provision (John 21:5-8)

Tired, hungry, and frustrated, it was at the moment when the disciples were least thinking of Jesus that he appeared. At the time they were not seeking Jesus, he sought them. What a grand and glorious truth for all us to remember!

We are informed that Jesus does three things here. First, Jesus asks a question. The point of the question is to reveal to the disciples their own need and failure. Jesus asked, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" And they had to answer sadly, "No."

Second, Jesus gives a command! In this case, he tells the disciples, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." Why the right side? Because that was the side they were directed to by Jesus! If he had said the left side, there would have been fish there. The point is not where the effort is to be made or how. It is whether it is being done under Christ's direction and in obedience to him or by our own wisdom and initiative.

Third, Jesus sends abundant blessings! He sends such a great catch of fish that they are unable to bring the catch into their boat. John states the number of fish in 21:11 as 153. This outcome closely resembles what happened when Jesus previously challenged Peter to let down his nets one more time after an unproductive night (Luke 5:4-7).

Now, there are all kind of meanings related to the number 153. But perhaps William Buckley offers us one of the best answers when he says, “This great catch of fishes was gathered into the net, and the net held them all, and the net was not broken. The net stands for the church. There is room in the church for all people of all nations. Even if they all come in, the church is big enough to hold them all.” John is telling us of the universality of the church. The welcome of the church is as universal as the love of God in Jesus Christ.

This would be a good place to re-read verses 7 and 8 of our text. The disciple “whom Jesus loved” is, according to tradition, the apostle John, author of this Gospel. He is the first to realize that the one who has just provided a huge catch of fish can only be the One who has command of the forces of nature. His declaration, “It is the Lord!” is the basis for Peter’s spontaneous act of jumping out of the boat and swimming to shore to meet Jesus.

What Peter does first upon hearing “It is the Lord” may be a bit confusing since it can seem that he puts on more clothing before jumping into the water! Scholars tell us that we should probably understand that he has been lightly clothed in a smock worn by fisherman, but that garment is loose around his body. So Peter wraps his outer garment around him to secure it close to his body so it doesn’t not interfere with swimming or wading.

We are informed that the distance to the shore is not so great that Peter cannot swim to shore. The close proximity to the shore (perhaps 100 yards) also helped the six other disciples cooperate to drag the net to shore. Normally, the catch of fish would be in the boat. But here the Lord’s provision is abundant, yet still within their capacity to receive it. Therefore, the disciples drag the catch of fishes to the shore.

Unexpected Meal (John 21:9-14)

When the nets become full of fish, John is the one who has the eyes to see, and Peter is the one who acts. These two friends are as different as night and day. John is the man of vision while Peter is the man of action. John says, “It is the Lord.” Peter jumps overboard, forgets the boat, forgets the fish, forgets John and the other disciples. The Lord is there. Say what we will about Peter’s misdeeds, there is a yearning for the Savior.

Now, the Lord who directs the fish to the fishermen’s net is also the Lord who fed hungry multitudes with a small amount of bread and fish (John 6:1-15). Most certainly, he is able to provide for his people in both large and small ways that astonish.

Jesus directs the disciples to bring some of the fish they had caught. At this point, Peter climbs back into the boat and helps drag the net ashore.

Scholars remind us that Jesus has called his disciples “to fish for people” (Matthew 4:18,19). He has told them that as the Father has sent him, so he was sending them (John 17:18;20,21). But how can this undistinguished bond, so often marked by weak faith and failure, undertake such a task? We are informed that the miraculous catch of the fish points to the answer. By themselves, these men are inadequate. But empowered by the Spirit of Christ (16;7-11), they will do great things (14:12-14). Abiding in Jesus, relying on his provision, they will bear much fruit (15:1-11).

Next, Jesus said to them in verse 12, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.

Note that the Lord is the host of this feast, and all present are his welcome guests. The doubt that plagued them and others is no more. The one who was dead is now gloriously alive again. They will testify with confidence about him and multitudes and generations who have not seen will believe.

In verse 13, Scholars describe Jesus’ actions as highlighting the meal as his gracious provision for his followers. As Jesus did with the multitude, he distributed the bread and fish himself (John 6:11). It is a simple meal, one typical for the times, but also an abundant meal, with plenty for everyone.

The concluding verse of our text states “this was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead” (21:14). The number of resurrection appearances here in John includes John 20:19-23 and 20:24-29, the first and second of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, “to his disciples.” But not so fast—what about the appearance to Mary Magdalene in John 20:11-18? Scholars asked if John has gotten his count wrong? They answer “no,” and state that the key lies in the phrase “to his disciples.” The word “disciples” is plural, whereas Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene represents an encounter with an individual. Further, the accounts by other Biblical writers record additional appearances, including the mention of an appearance to Peter individually.

Summary

To me, John is stating at least four main truths from this text (John 21:1-14). First, the most important aim of this story is to make quite clear the reality of the Resurrection. The Resurrection was not a vision, the figment of someone’s excited imagination. It was an unexpected, life-transforming event in real space and time. It changed the flow of history as it fulfilled the most important promises of God. As scholars assert, the Resurrection accounts of John and others demonstrate how real and powerful was and is the Resurrection of Jesus.

Second, Christ’s presence and provision for Christians are constant. Whatever situation or circumstance we find ourselves, He is with us. He never fails or forsakes us. And though Jesus is not present in the flesh as he was with the disciples, he is no less present with us by the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). Are we ready to testify to his constant provision?

Third, this story makes clear that the church is wide enough to embrace all people of all nations. We note again the symbol of the 153 large fish and the net which was not torn. There is no exclusiveness in the church. The embrace of the church is as universal as the love of God in Christ.

And finally, all of us are called to be fishers of humankind! As someone suggested, “fish” means “men and women” but “fishing” symbolizes “evangelism.” Jesus stated, “As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.”

Now, we may not be able to write a paper on the atonement. We may not understand Jesus’ humanity and divinity. But we may be like the man who was born blind and was touched by Jesus. He stated, “I was blind, but now I see.” In reality, that’s all that’s necessary to become a fisher of humankind.

Action Plan

1. Where do you see God’s provision in our text (John 21:1-14) and in our lives today? Explain!
2. How would things change were we to acknowledge Christ as host and center of mealtimes?
3. Discuss the reality and power of Jesus’ resurrection in the lives of class members.

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